DRYDEN'S INFLUENCE ON THE DRAMATICAL LITERATURE OF ENGLAND

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Dryden's influence on the dramatical literature of England

The diligent observer of the history of mankind will never fail to trace in it the onward march of progress, mightily pressing forward at times, often imperceptibly, yet ever without interruption. History however is not a bare relation of the fate that has befallen empires and cities, nor a nomenclature of battles and dates, or a panegyric of men renowned for their valour in the field or their cunning in the cabinet, for all these are but accidentalities attending the advance of the human race by civilization to liberty and prosperity. A true history of the human race ought to take account of every influence that has been exercised upon it by every circumstance and every event affecting it and those parallel or diverging ought to be weighed in judging rightly of the state of civilization generally or of that of a certain nation at a given time. For unless such is done it will never be possible to account satisfactorily for the strange changes that sciences arts and industry have undergone in the course of time, which have frequently risen to high excellence at one period and

have suddenly decayed in that succeeding. If the literature of a nation at a stated period be the expression of the aspirations and tastes of the educated and well-bred, the remark will generally hold good, that it has gathered its greatest triumphs during times of commotion internal or external, during times of great national activity or violent struggles for change of present circumstances, when there is a general upheaving of old ideas and the hearts of men are quickened with the hope of securing a purer and higher condition of humanity. Conversely, then, literature may be considered to languish when a nation is reposing in exhaustion, when there is a small show of public activity and new vigour is to be gained after times of trouble and anxious disquiet. Such times generally can show little that is original, rules and precepts then hold unlimited sway, every thing is done with caution and care and literature not unfrequently turns to foreign models, not being sufficiently confident in its excellence when following the promptings of the national bias.

This decay of poetry and the consequent imitation of foreign models was, however, not wholly owing to causes derived from the passive state of repose in which the English nation indulged after the restoration and the general indifference to the prosecution of any elevated aims; its primary source must be traced to the progress of the world's history. The middle ages were at their close, their spirit had vanished with their institutions and the first influence

of the gradual advance towards a new development of society, however beneficial it might prove in later times, was blighting to the flight of fancy and the production of tender and imaginative poetry.

All Europe then, following the example of Italy, turned to the study of the Romans and subsequently to that of the French who had been the most successful in bringing about the renaissance of letters; England followed the general impulse. The reluctant manner in which it did so is well compared by Pope in his essay on criticism with the opposition made by the English to the early Roman invaders. Thus, he says, we remained unpolished, there were few only who had the courage to advocate the cause of the ancients and to lay down the fundamental laws of wit.

Into such a state of literary languour England had fallen at the restoration after having passed through a period as illustrious in literary merit as any that has graced the history of a nation. Shakspere, Jonson, Beaumont and Fletcher were dead, the first all but forgotten, Milton alone rose in solitary grandeur in this time of literary inanity, but he can scarcely be said to belong to that age, although his “Paradise Lost” was published in it (1667), for he lived in a world to himself as it were, forgotten and himself trying to forget a state of things that had been raised on the ruins of the fond aspirations of his youth and manhood and unable then to exercise any

influence upon it. That was the time that witnessed the triumphs of John Dryden, a man gifted with high intellectual powers, a clear perception and correct judgment which he was willing to employ whenever his own interest or the fear of offending the prevailing taste of the higher circles of society did not oppose, versatile in the extreme, and, though he was well able to instruct, he was entirely wanting in those gentler faculties of the mind by which it is the poet's lofty privilege to touch and to delight. Leaving aside his merits in lyric and epic poetry and in satire, which was ideed that species of literature to which his genius most inclined and in which he has been most successful, it is certain, that the reputation he gained as a dramatist was wholly owing lo the time into which his lot had been cast. For not only have all his plays been entirely forgotten and are mentioned now only as links in the chain of the literary productions of the English poets, but the representation of any of his plays would not now he suffered by any refined audience. Johnson says very meaningly, that in writing the biography of Dryden he wished, he might he spared any mention of his dramatical works, yet Dryden was during the greater part of his life employed in the composition of them and to them he owes the fame and the preferment he enjoyed in his own time. He was, however, well aware himself, that his genius was in no way fitted for the drama and yet he wrote plays for the simple reason, as he makes a point of openly declaring, of enjoying the greater monetary advantages they produced. So depraved,

however, was the taste of the people at that time, that they could be pleased with productions indulging in supine extravagances and devoid of all the influences that could touch the softer chords of the human heart.

Yet Dryden's influence on English dramatical literature has doubtlessly been very great. This, however, is not so much owing to the examples he set in the composition of his dramas, as to a series of criticisms on the dramatical art which, although they contain little that is original, and though, in spite of the purity of the language he employs and the ease and elegance of diction, they are frequently rather tedious on account of many superfluous repetitions, yet have the great merit of being the first of that species of criticism in a country, where, before Dryden, it was utterly unknown. It appears, however, that he was himself uncertain what rules to follow and what taste to prescribe in the tragic art, for we see him wavering to and fro, now inclining to the solemn and stately gravity of the French tragedy, now advocating the intermixture of the pathetic with the vulgar or burlesque, that had till then been usually found on the English stage. Nevertheless he may be regarded as the founder of the French style in tragedy, as he was undoubtedly in lyric and epic poesy, a style that found its most ardent admirers in Pope and Young and continued to be generally recognized as artistic and correct up to the time when Goldsmith and his contemporaries freed English literature from its trammels. It may, however, be doubted if Dryden

adhered to it through a conviction of its excellence and it seems reasonable to suppose from the bent of his character, that he did so chiefly for two very weighty reasons, the first being that the taste of the king whose patronage Dryden was most anxious to obtain, inclined that way, the second, that he was much better fitted to excel in a form of tragedy in which correct delineation of character, facility of dialogue and the pomp of versification might compensate for warmth of feeling and elevation of sentiment.

In order fully to understand Dryden's position as a dramatical writer, it is necessary to give a concise sketch of the state of the English stage during the time immediately preceding that in which he wrote.

During the political struggle that took place in the reign of Charles I. the dramatic muse had lain dormant in England. The Puritans who had at last gained the ascendancy, held every production of the fine arts in utter abomination, their animosity was, however, principally directed against theatrical representations of whatever kind they might be. At that time not only had the theatres been closed, but any leaning to such diversions and occupations as the Puritans had proscribed, never failed to be construed into political opposition and was rudely suppressed. When, therefore, Charles II. was restored to the throne, the nation at large had almost forgotten that they had once delighted in theatrical representations.

The king, however, was naturally anxious to blot out everything that could remind the people of the rule of the party lately in power, he was, moreover, particularly fond of theatrical amusements which had formed his principal pastime when in exile. The restitution of the theatres to their former importance and their endowment with new splendour was therefore as much a matter of prudence as of predilection, for not only was a well appointed stage at the royal court supposed to surround it with a peculiar splendour but also it would be instrumental in thoroughly persuading the public at large that the rule of the Puritans and their forced austerity were now at an end. The theatres were therefore reopened under royal patronage and were soon more crowded than ever. All attractions that could possibly be brought to bear were put forward, the splendour of scenery, dresses and decoration heightened the effect of the representations, it was then also for the first time in public theatres that women took part in the performance, a custom that had till then been restricted to the court and to the castles of the nobility. Charles II. on his accession to the throne, then, was eager to grant full privileges for theatrical representation to two companies of players, the one of which, enjoying the patronage of the Duke of York under the direction of Sir W. Davenant was called the Duke's company, the other directed by Thomas Killegrew who were to act at the King's theatre adopted the name of the King's servants. A splendid opportunity was therefore offered to dramatic poets

for the exercise of their talents, moreover the drama thenceforward and for almost a century from that time was that department of literature in which the poet's exertions were more amply rewarded than in any other.

Dryden was one of the great number of those, who, as the small amount of paternal fortune obliged him to increase his income by some means or other, resolved to devote his time and his powers chiefly to the drama, as being the most lucrative employment that his genius would admit, “though,” he says of himself, “it never inclined me much to writing for the stage.” Having once entered upon the career of a dramatic writer, he kept possession of the stage for many years, not that he was without rivals and was often severely criticised, but he succeeded in establishing his reputation to such a degree, that he was considered an authority in dramatical matters, and was always sure of an attentive hearing, however the public might finally decide.

As the king and his licentious retainers who had formed their tastes in Spain and France favoured the introduction of the French style of dramatic composition and this was in direct opposition to that previously prevalent in England, as, moreover, the mercenary dramatists of the time were obliged to please not only the court but also the people at large, it became incumbent upon them to try a conciliation of two tendencies of taste so utterly at variance with

each other. This was certainly the aim that Dryden proposed to himself, but as he was dependent upon court favour, it is with the utmost caution, at times exceedingly ludicrous, that he now and then advances what we may suppose to be his real opinion of the writers who had till then reigned supreme on the English stage. He is continually pandering to the taste of the courtiers as a body or to the individual opinion of noblemen whose patronage he wished to obtain, and so frequently does he contradict himself, that it is exceedingly difficult to guess what his opinions really were. It seems highly probable, that, had his position in life been such, that he had not been obliged to rely for support upon his pen, he would have been a strenuous advocate of the readmission to the stage of the dramatists belonging to the age preceding his, for if we carefully peruse his criticisms of them, we may easily discover, that, whenever he deprecates their language, their style or their plots, he does so with a self-complacent reflexion upon the refined state of society or the excellence of the drama of his time, upon his own dramatic powers or the elegance of his own language. Thus it is, that, as he failed to bring about the mediation above alluded to, yet would not oppose his opinions to the taste prevailing at the court, he made a compromise with himself, and, well knowing where success was to be found, he sided with the ruling party and advocated the introduction of the French style of tragedy.

Dryden's most important rival at the commencement of his dramatical career was Sir William Davenant who was well contented with following the model of the French drama. The first tragedy that was acted after the restoration was a novel kind of play by that author, to which he gave the name of “Heroic Opera” and which bore the title: “The siege of Rhodes made a representation by the art of prospective in scenes; and the story sung in recitative musick." It pleased, and Edw. Howard, ‘Robert Howard and William Stapleton imitated it, so that in a short time it became the favourite form of play. In the year 1670 Dryden published, as an apology for the extravagances he had since himself introduced, an “Essay on Heroic Plays" in which he blames the lameness of the action, the simplicity of design and the want of variety of characters. A heroic play, he says, ought to be an imitation of a heroic epos and, consequently, love and valour ought to be the theme of it. But he is by no means satisfied with that. He also demands many apparitions of gods and spirits, noise of battle etc. for by this, he says, the tragedian distinguishes himself from the historian who only tells dry facts. Yet here, though he professes boldly to cut out a new road, his usual caution again overcomes him, so that, in order ta conciliate those that might be opposed to his views, he excuses himself with the example of Shakspere and Jonson, who, he says, had frequently used all the means that he recommends, to heighten to effect of the

representation, such as the use of trumpets, drums and shows of battle.

It is not known with certainty at what date Dryden's first play was acted, it appears, however, probable, that he commenced writing for the stage in the year 1663, the thirty second of his age. His first play was a comedy called the “WiId Gallant”. His performance met with very ill success and for some time blighted his prospects. Nothing daunted, however, and driven by necessity, he published in the year following “the Rival Ladies” which he dedicated to the earl of Orrery, a man equally distinguished as a writer and as a statesman. This play was written in rhyme, which Dryden defends in the dedication by arguments which he repeats almost verbatim in all his later essays on the drama. He attributes to rhyme a particular grace in repartees and says, that “the sudden smartness of the answer and the sweetness of the rhyme set off the beauty of each other.” The greatest advantage of it, however, he considers to consist in its bounding and circumscribing the fancy, for, he says, the imagination of the poet must be restrained, and blank verse, being more easy of composition, tempts the poet to say many things that might better be omitted entirely or said in fewer words. Here then Dryden openly declares himself an advocate of the French style, but he we I knew, that he was addressing a man who would be glad to hear any arguments that might prove

the propriety of the style of dramatical composition he himself followed.

The earl of Orrery had been the first to introduce rhyme in tragedies not long after the restoration and Dryden probably thought, that he could best make the public forget the failure of the “Wild Gallant” and secure success for the future by adopting the style of that nobleman and, thereby, at the same time flattering the taste of the king. His defence of rhyme, however, in the preface to the “Rival Ladies” engaged him in a dispute with Sir Robert Howard whose sister was Dryden's wife, and in connexion with whom he had written his third tragedy entitled: “The Indian Queen” published in 1666. Sir Robert Howard in the preface to a collection of his plays had censured Dryden's opinions. Dryden therefore vindicated himself in his “Essay on dramatic poetry" which was written in the form of a conversation between four friends, Eugenius, Crites, Lisidejus aud Neander who are supposed to have met and to row down the Thames on the eve of the naval engagement near Lowestoft in the year 1665, in order to listen to the sound of the firing, and who on their return, from conjecturing on the many panegyrics that would in all probability be written on the victorious admiral, are led to consider the respective merits of English and French tragedy. It is not known with certainty who the persons hid under the feigned names of Eugenius and Lisidejus were, but it is most probable, that Crites was meant to represent Sir

Robert Howard and Neander plainly is Dryden himself. Though this essay was obviously intended to answer the exceptions Sir Robert Howard had taken at the opinions expressed in Dryden's preface to “the Rival Ladies” still, anxious not to offend either party, Dryden distinctly says in an “address to the reader” prefixed to it, that he had “chiefly written it to vindicate the honour of English writers from the censure of those who unjustly prefer the French before them”, and with his wonted caution adds, that that essay was written in the country without the help of books or the advice of friends, so that, on that consideration, any shortcomings of his might be excused. This essay, however, is certainly the finest work that flowed from Dryden's pen. At the time it was written, Dryden was still a timorous candidate for fame and this essay, therefore, bears the stamp of diligence and care, both of which, unhappily, he frequently remitted when his reputation was firmly established. The account he gives of the English dramatists is exceedingly striking, his criticism of Shakspere especially is delightful in conception and most elegant in execution, and may be regarded as a model of critical concision, for, in a few words he so fully exhibits a character so vast in its comprehension and so wonderful in its individuality, that he seems to have bestowed upon him all the praise, and drawn up all the comment that forms the gist of the many volumes composed to do honour to his memory.

Sir Robert Howard, however, not satisfied with that liberal exposition of the question, renewed the attack against Dryden in the preface to a play, called “the Duke of Lerma” which he published in the year 1667, and which, though written in a very confused style and with a small show of genius or striking argument, purposed ridiculing Dryden's defence of rhyme in tragedies. Though it appears, that amity had till then existed between these two men, still Dryden, being the attacked party, and obliged by necessity, to save his reputation, probably also offended at Sir Robert Howard's off-hand and authoritative style, wrote a very vehement defence of his opinions, which he prefixed to the second edition of his “Indian Emperor” published in the same year as the “Duke of Lerma.” His defence was naturally restricted to upholding the different points of opinion advanced in the first essay, on which Sir Robert Howard had founded his attack. The manner in which Dryden acquitted himself of this task is in my opinion one of the most eminent proofs of the pungency of his wit and the sharpness of his satire, and doubt whether there are many instances in the history of the war of pamphlets, where an opponent certainly not contemptible has been so thoroughly overcome with his own weapons. This defence was however, probably as a favour shown to Sir Robert Howard, on that writer's own request, omitted in the following editions of the “Indian Emperor” and even in the second it is not added to all the copies.

Dryden's next piece was a tragi-comedy entitled: “Secret love or the Maiden Queen”. In the preface to it he tells the public, that it is regular according to the strictest of dramatic laws, and recommends it upon this assertion, which, in his opinion, he himself is qualified to make. With regard to the ornament of writing and to those parts where fancy predominates, he says, the poet is frequently prevented by self-love to see his faults. Notwithstanding his own recommendation, however, he seems not to have been well assured himself of the value of this piece, for he qualifies it in saying, that he fears, people who have seen it performed will be disappointed in reading it, the scenery and the excellence of representation having greatly enhanced the impression he supposes it to have made.

Then followed in quick succession “Sir Martin Mar-all”, a comedy, “the Tempest”, an alteration of Shakspere's play, “an Evenings Love” or “the Mock Astrologer”, a comedy, “Tyrannic Love” or the “Virgin martyr", a tragedy, and “the Conquest of Granada”. All of these plays, including the “Indian Queen" and the “Indian Emperor" were produced between the year 1668, when, on Sir William Davenant's death, Dryden obtained the Laureateship, and the year 1671, the period that may be considered as that of his greatest productiveness, and when, as most of these plays were favourably received at the court, Dryden was at the height of his fame and had the undisputed controll of the stage. The French style

in the composition of plays according to the rules of Corneille as well with regard to the structure of the plots as to the employment of verse then thoroughly prevailed by Dryden's efforts and authority, and he must have thought his victory complete, when a sudden blow came to overthrow all his endeavours. This was the representation of a farce called “the Rehearsal”, written by the Duke of Buckingham in conjunction with some other adversaries of the style Dryden had introduced for the purpose of holding up to ridicule the poet and his productions. It imitated with the greatest felicity all the rant and bombast employed in his heroic pieces, introducing gorgeous processions and apparitions, noise of battle etc. and exhibiting all the extravagances of the action in Dryden's plays, which had attained their acme in the “Conquest of Granada”. The poet himself, moreover, was introduced under the name of Bayes and his manners and usual modes of expression mimicked with signal success. Dryden must have been thoroughly ignorant of the progress of that satire, else he would with his usual ease in recanting and changing his opinion to the public, have blunted its sting by some sudden literary repentance, but, on the contrary, he precipitated the doom that hung over him by the representation of the “Conquest of Granada”, that play in which he seems to have been determined to glut the public with dramatic wonders. All that can be incredible in love and impossible in valour, all that can be extravagant in conception and unlikely in action he has here brought together and tried to

heighten the effect by the most gorgeous apparel of the stage. It is highly probable, that this extravagance would have produced a reaction in the public taste, even if a determining motive had not come to its aid, for we are told by Gildon, that: “the success of that play was not owing to the excellency of the poet's performance but to the extravagance”; for he “had always observed it to have the effect of comedy on the audience.” So much the more the blow inflicted upon Dryden by the “Rehearsal” must have been fatal and it is certain, that he never recovered from it.

There is however evidence to show, that the “Rehearsal” was not originally intended against Dryden, it seems to have originated with the introduction of the heroic Opera of Sir Will. Davenant, for there are some traits in it, that refer specially to that poet. It may also have been directed against Sir Robert Howard with the collateral object of passing off some severe ridicule upon other prominent characters of that time, for it contains passages that unmistakeably warrant that conclusion. The design then seems to have been to ridicule the reigning dramatist of the time and the prevailing taste for the French style of composition, and the idea of bringing it forward had probably been set aside for some time, when the representation of the “Conquest of Granada” revived it. Dr. Johnson is of opinion, that the satire could not possibly have been intended to ridicule that play, as he says, it was not published till 1678, but it appears, that he has mistaken the date,

and that it was first represented in 1671; besides the effect of the “Rehearsal” on the public is well known, and it is certain, that Dryden could not have thought of writing the “Conquest of Granada" seven years afterwards with any chance of success.

Dryden, however, behaved very prudently in the sight of this defeat. He openly avowed, that he considered the piece an injustice to him, but praised the humour and the artistic form of it.

He had been thoroughly convinced, however, that he would have to contrive a new method, if he wished to retain the authority he had till then exercised in matters of dramatic taste. He, accordingly, like a clever mechanic who can put his hand to a new pattern, if the old one is found to have gone out of fashion, resolved to omit apparitions and battles and to exhibit the action simply and suitably by chiefly observing its unity and to develop the characters and situations from inner causes, a resolve, the reasons for which he expounded in his “Essay on Criticism” prefixed as a preface to the play of “Troilus and Cressida”. The result of his endeavours in this respect was the tragedy of “Aureng-Zebe” published in 1671. This play certainly exhibits them unmistakeably, and there are many passages in it which, on account of the natural show of sentiment and the simplicity of expression may be read with pleasure. It is still written in verse, but Dryden says in the preface to it, that he is “grown weary of his long-

loved mistress" rhyme, "for the passions are not to be forced into such narrow bounds". He accordingly never afterwards produced a heroic play. "Thus the reign of heroic tragedies which had been introduced at the restoration, ended, after it had lasted about fifteen years, and the few heroic plays that afterwards appeared, never rose to public favour".

Yet though he thenceforward abandoned verse, French influence may be traced in all his later plays.

The interval between the composition of the "Conquest of Granada" and "Aureng-Zebe" is filled up by comedies, which were all of indifferent value and indeed the product rather of his necessities than of any desire to improve the state of the stage. His comedies have never commanded a success equal to that of his tragedies. Comedy was certainly that species of stage-literature for which his genius was least fitted. This he acknowledges himself, as he says in the defence of his essay on dramatic poetry: "I know I am not fitted by nature to write comedy; I want that gaiety of humour which is required to it. My conversation is slow and dull, my humour saturnine and reserved etc., so that those that decry my comedies, do me no injury, except it be in point of profit: reputation in them is the last thing to which I shall pretend". Indeed, the mirth his comedies excited, did not arise so much from the humour he displayed as from the conjunction of incongruous circumstances in them; all that he exhibited as humorous or

passionate, he seems to have had at second-hand, it consisted in great part in imitation of other poets and it has never been known, that any of his comedies ever called forth an outburst of laughter or applause from the audience.

Of the plays he wrote after the wholesome lesson imparted by the “Rehearsal” the most valuable besides “Aureng-Zebe” are: “All for love or the world well lost, “a tragedy founded on the story of Anthony and Cleopatra, the “Spanish Friar” and “Don Sebastian” the latter of which is generally considered the best of his dramatic performances, because it made some approaches to the possibilities of real life, though the humour of it was dull. The dispute and reconciliation of Dorax and Sebastian, to all intents and purposes a close imitation of the similar scene of Brutus and Cassius in Shakspere’s “Julius Caesar” is not devoid of merit. “All for love” is also an imitation of Shakspere’s “Anthony and Cleopatra" and on account of this connexion perhaps the most interesting of his plays. A comparison between the two would however prove a very ungrateful and purposeless task, if it were not to increase our admiration of Shakspere’s genius. I consider it to have been a very unlucky idea in Dryden to select just this piece for imitation in which, perhaps more than in any other of his plays, the dramatic power of Shakspere appears, as well in the admirable art with which he has brought harmony into the multiplicity of events and characters as in the power with which he

has here reproduced the struggle between honourable actions and dishonourable temptations, manly desires and effeminate corruption. That Dryden did choose it, may well be considered as one of the many profs that, though lavish in his praise of Shakspere, he did not in the least understand his real power and greatness, and it seems highly probable, that he was chiefly attracted by the gorgeousness of that play to imitate it, as thereby able to attract his corrupted audience. In Shakspere's play the love that bound Anthony and Cleopatra does not leave upon the mind of the spectator the impression of the mere passion and sensual appetite, because Shakspere has veiled them and atoned for that love by its evident sincerity and depth, whereas Dryden has recommended as laudable and worthy of imitation that conduct which can never but be utterly condemned in all respects.

The last piece Dryden wrote was a tragi-comedy called: “Love triumphant”. It is said to have been unsuccessful. Thus he began and ended his dramatical career with ill success.

It is evident from the preceding sketch that, had Dryden written nothing but his plays, he would have exercised but little influence on the English drama. He had, indeed, the good sense of referring his dramatic essays to rules which he propounded as correct ones and thereby making his efforts in dramatical composition acceptable to the public, more particulary to that large class of educated men who

were satisfied with anything, so it was done according to rules they considered imperative. But the merits for which Dryden will always hold a conspicuous place in English literary history are the great impulse he gave to the refinement of the language by precept not only but also by example, and to the prosecution of dramatical criticism. The severe blame he launches against Shakspere and Jonson for the language they used, is for the most part extremely unjust and shows plainly, that Dryden was but superficially acquainted with the language current at their time. He may be justified, strictly speaking, in blaming a man like Jonson who was supposed to be one of the greatest scholars of the time, for certain improprieties of accidence which an acutely grammatical mind ought to discover, but it is still open to question whether Jonson would have strictly adhered to faultless grammar even on the supposition of his having had a correct knowledge of it, at a time, when the use of it would to common opinion have appeared far-fetched, and the commonly established usage was the law for writers. For Jonson's force, especially in his comedies, consisted chiefly in showing off peculiarities of men of the lower and middle classes of society, it is therefore plain, that he could not be too nice as to points of strict grammar. Besides there are many things which Dryden blames as ungrammatical, and which, as they were not considered so at the time Jonson wrote, would not be deemed faulty even in our own days, as, for instance, placing the preposition governing a relative pronoun

at the end of a sentence, this custom, moreover, consisting in strict analogy with the usage in cognate modern languages as the Swedish and Danish at the present day. And, to say the truth, there can be gathered from Dryden's writings, notwithstanding their generally very elegant character, numerous ungrammatical turns, though they probably will be excused by his admirers with carelessness and great haste in writing, but there are faults of accidence continually recurring as, for instance, the use of an adjective instead of the qualifying adverb before another adjective. But that being the custom of the time at which Dryden wrote, a custom that even at this day obtains generally in America to which country it was introduced by the Pilgrim fathers, it would be unfair to censure him for it. The great merit of Dryden as a refiner of the language consists in the propriety he evinces in the choice of words. In justly combining such as would exactly suit the matter they are to exhibit, he has attained to the ease and elegance of his style. The proper choice of words is one of the chief conditions of a clear and correct style, the misuse of them generally furnishes an indication as to the backwardness of mental culture in a writer. Such misuse of words being once introduced in the literary productions of a nation, it will be continued by custom, and thus we generally find in the works belonging to the middle-ages the prevalence of either bombast or feebleness of expression, things of small account being exhibited in words of great strength, and conversely, important notions not being

adequately represented by the words used in their delineation. The greatest praise is therefore due to those men who, favoured by nature with the taste of original propriety, first practised this delicacy of selection and who, aided by genius and parts, rose to sufficient literary authority to induce posterity, to follow up the tract they had opened up for them. It seldom happens, that the prose writings of a nation attain to that high standard by successive and slow improvements to which one clear mind may suddenly give the impulse. This man to English modern literature was Dryden. The refinement he wrought in the language is due not only to his prose compositions but perhaps even in a greater measure to his translations of ancient epics and his improvements in the art of versification. Though Dryden cannot be said to have made any great advances in literature, it is certain, that he improved his versification as he advanced in years and productiveness. Mr. Harte fixes the year 1676 as the period at which Dryden settled his versification, when, after the publication of the play of "Aureng-Zebe" the poet says of himself, he had obtained the full effect of diligence and had added facility to exactness. It may be mentioned as a curious proof of the great want in Dryden of poetical taste during the earlier part of his career, that in the poem: "annus mirabilis" published in 1666 he laboured under the impression, that technical expressions ought to be employed in poetry, whenever the subject demanded them. The following verse in "nautical language" occurring among others

of a similar nature in the poem alluded to, is perhaps one of the most curious conceits that the literature of any nation can boast of:

"So here some picko ut bullets from the side,
Some drive old oakum through each seam and rift
Their left hand does the caulking-iron guide,
The rattling mallet with the right they lift".

As Dryden had been the principal introducer of rhyme into English dramatical literature, it may not be out of place to give a short account of his versification. There will be little doubt of the justice of the praise Pope bestowed on Dryden when he says:

....Dryden taught to join
The varying verse, the full resounding line,
The long majestic march and energy divine,

if said of the mere mechanism of verse and in comparison to the efforts of preceding writers. He appears never to have been at a loss for a rhyme, and the smoothness and ease with which his verses flow, is certainly remarkable, if it is considered, that he, in most instances, sent his verses to the press as soon as a certain number had been composed.

His favourite form of verse was the Alexandrine which he imitated from the French. In Dryden's Alexandrine some deviations from the French verse are, however, worthy of note. The

French verse invariably consists of twelve syllables, that of Dryden, in imitation of Drayton, frequently alternated with twelve and fourteen; another difference is, that the French always have a caesura in the sixth syllable, a rule which Dryden frequently violated. Couplets of fourteen syllables were used before Dryden's time and have lately been revived by Macaulay in his "Lays of ancient Rome", they are, however, now generally used in the form of quatrains of eight and six syllables alternately. Dryden seldom abandons the use of couplets; the "annus mirabilis" is the only one of his larger poems where he used quartains, a measure that he ever afterwards discontinued, on account of its difficulty which he himself acknowledged. He frequently intermixed his couplets with triplets to give more variety to them; these were marked with brackets in the margin in order to direct the attention of the reader to them beforehand, so that he might not stop short in reading them. There is no doubt that variety in verse is a great ornament to it, an ornament which English verse most readily admits of in allowing the substitution of similitude for identity of rhyme, but the essence of verse being regularity, such variety must not be introduced at the risk of disappointing the ear. A mechanical direction such as that used in the triplets, is certainly something very clumsy and unskilful. There is, however, scarcely a measure which Dryden has not tried, and the specimens he has given are worthy the name of models, as they are most elegant and correct. Johnson blames them for two frequent

shortcomings, in the first place, that they have frequent endings of the first line with a weak syllable, whereas the second ends with a strong one, in the second place, that his periods frequently terminate the first line of a couplet. I do not, however, see any reason to object to this, as those who follow the contrary use, have nothing more in favour of them than custom.

Dryden's chief influence on the development of the English drama consists, as I have said above, in his dramatical criticisms. To us who have by the successive efforts of powerful writers and critics attained to a clear insight into the structure of dramatical poems, there is certainly in Dryden's criticisms little that is new. The very question he generally discusses in them of the unities of time, place and action has since been so frequently worked up and so completely exhausted, that it could scarcely be expected of a man of average literary attainments that be should with any amount of pleasure and satisfaction read through Dryden's treatises, if it were not for the elegance of the language, the artful and varied representation of opposite probabilities, the clearness of the illustrations and the animated and rigorous sprightliness they exhibit. Though these merits in the eyes of succeeding ages coalesce with his refinement of language, yet to his contemporaries his essays had the accompanying merit of being the first in the language that afforded a clear insight into the art of dramatical composition and directed

attention to the prosecution of such enquiries. Further than this their original value is not great, for even in Dryden's time there was to those who were acquainted with the contemporary drama of foreign nations little in them that was novel as, indeed, our author is taxed by Martin Clifford in his letters on Dry den published in the year 1674, “to have stollen the essay on dramatic poetry from Mons. Hedelin, Menardine and Corneille”, but at a time in which books were comparatively rare and literary communication was not frequent between the nations, the effect of Dryden's essays must not be underrated. It is, however, impossible to say what rules Dryden has really laid down in his essays, for as his criticism is in every instance occasional, he has no hesitation to lay down as a rule that which may suit his purpose at the time, even on the manifest danger of unsaying what he had said before. Constancy was not one of the component parts of his mind, and the same fickleness that induced him to change his religion three times at the spur of the moment, may also be traced in his criticism. Trapp, speaking of Dryden's eulogy of the “Canterbury Tales” well sketches this inconstancy in saying: “Novimus viri illius maximi non semper accuratissimas esse censuras, nec ad severissimam critices normam exactas : illo judice id plerumque optimum est quod nunc prae manibus habet et in quo nunc occupatur”.

Thus the question of Dryden's influence on the English drama resolves itself into this: If he has

generally been set down by English critics as having introduced the French taste, that opinion must be held to be correct as far as the result of his writings is concerned, but it wants considerable qualification with regard to his intention to do so. As he was without doubt the most talented dramatical writer of his time and as he considered himself dependent upon the favour of the great in the career he had chosen, and thereby obliged to flatter their tastes, all the praise and blame of introducing the style favoured at court, falls, of course, upon him. It may therefore reasonably be said of him, that he was the introducer of the French taste by the force of circumstances. He had little sensibility of the power of effusions purely natural, simplicity gave him no pleasure, ratiocination was the favourite exercise of his mind. The endeavour after the grand and new produced many sentiments, either great or bulky and images, either just or merely splendid.

Yet lasting and important was his influence on the English drama, indirectly in refining the language and directly in raising it from the state of a purely natural effusion to the rank of a regular work of art, and of pointing out the road to excellence, though he himself was unable to attain it.